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ABSTRACT

The recommendations in this paper are based on the findings of a survey of 32 institutions that had subscribed--for a fee--to receive live via satellite one or more of five staff development teleconferences for school teachers and administrators. The teleconferences, which were one-way video/two-way audio productions, were broadcast during 1985-86 by the College of Education of Oklahoma State University. Data were collected via telephone interviews with representatives of 30 of the 32 teleconference receiving sites, which included public schools, vocational-technical schools, colleges and universities, a state department of education, and a hospital. Respondents were queried about the use and coordination of the teleconferences at their institutions and asked for suggestions on how originating institutions and receiving institutions might improve the utilization and effectiveness of such teleconferences. They were also asked to assess the feasibility and potential benefits of several features of teleconferences, i.e., advance readings, hand-out materials, interaction between the sites and the national presenters, and local discussion and "wraparound programming." Seven hypotheses suggested by the study are listed, and extensive and detailed recommendations based on the survey findings are provided for the design, production, and promotion of teleconferences by the originating institution, as well as coordination and promotion of the teleconferences at receiving institutions. The bibliography lists 38 sources that were cited in the dissertation study. (DJR)

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THE EFFECTIVE UTILIZATION OF NATIONAL STAFF DEVELOPMENT TELECONFERENCES: RECOMMENDATIONS FROM A SURVEY OF USERS

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of the
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The Effective Utilization of National Staff Development Teleconferences: Recommendations from a Survey of Users

Constance M. Lawry

The recommendations in this paper are based on the research which the author completed for her dissertation. The dissertation study, titled "Staff Development Teleconferences for Teachers: A Case Study of Their Use and Suggestions for Improving Their Effectiveness," was completed in July, 1986. It examined the thirty-two institutions which subscribed for a fee to receive live via satellite one or more of the five staff development teleconferences for school teachers and administrators which were broadcast during 1985-86 by the College of Education of Oklahoma State University. The five teleconferences, which were one-way video/two-way audio productions, included: "State-Mandated Student Assessment Programs," "Concerns, Issues, and New Directions in Early Education," "School Law Update," "Younger and Older Learners Together: Solving the Instructor's Dilemma," and "New Directions in Reading Instruction: Theory and Practice."

Telephone interviews were conducted with representatives of 30 of the 32 receiving sites. Of the 30 total participants in the study, 14 were from institutions located within the state of Oklahoma and 16 were from institutions located outside the state. Out-of-state locations represented in the study included: Georgia, Illinois, Iowa, Kentucky, Michigan, Minnesota, Montana, New York, North Carolina, Texas, Virginia, Washington, Wisconsin, and one site in Canada. By category, the 30 institutions included:

--five individual public schools, all of them located in the state of Oklahoma;

--two out-of-state consortia of public schools;
--six vocational-technical schools in the state of Oklahoma, which serve not only the adult learner but also the students of a number of high schools which feed into their facilities;
--three out-of-state technical institutes, which do not serve high school students but instead direct all of their services to the post-secondary learner;
--two Oklahoma colleges or universities;
--nine out-of-state colleges or universities; and
--three other institutions, one of which is located in Oklahoma and two of which are located outside the state: a state department of vocational-technical education; a state department of education; and a hospital.

The study queried respondents on the use and coordination of the teleconferences at their institutions and solicited their suggestions on how originating institutions and receiving institutions might improve the utilization and effectiveness of such teleconferences. In addition, the study asked selected respondents to assess the feasibility and potential benefits of the following features of teleconferences: advance readings, hand-out materials, interaction between the sites and the national presenters, and local discussion and wraparound programming (defined, literally, as locally-produced programming delivered before, during breaks in, or after the national broadcast--i.e., "wrapped around" the national program).

For a full discussion of the study's results, the reader is referred to the author's dissertation (Oklahoma State University, 1986). The remainder of this paper includes: the list of seven research hypotheses which were suggested by the study; the recommendations for the practitioner which emanated from the study; and the bibliography of materials which were cited within the dissertation.

Research Hypotheses for Future Testing

While the study's focus on one case limits its representativeness and does not allow valid generalizations to the population of all staff development teleconferences and all potential users, it does permit generalization to

theoretical propositions (Yin, 1984, p. 21). The case study approach lends itself to the identification of variables and interactions which might be important to the phenomenon under study. These possible variables and interactions are then expressed in terms of tentative hypotheses which are recommended for future testing.

Seven research hypotheses regarding staff development teleconferences for school teachers and administrators were suggested by this study:

Hypothesis 1: Generally, teachers will find more meaningful those teleconferences which are designed as workshops rather than those which rely on a conference format.

Hypothesis 2: There will be a positive correlation between educators' perceptions of the quality and the usefulness of a staff development teleconference and the extent to which the teleconference is perceived as focusing on the practical rather than the theoretical.

Hypothesis 3: There will be a positive correlation between educators' perceptions of the quality and the usefulness of a staff development teleconference and their perceptions of the relevance and the quality of the hand-out materials.

Hypothesis 4: There will be a positive correlation between educators' perceptions of the quality and the usefulness of a staff development teleconference and the extent to which they have had the opportunity to participate in a facilitated discussion or formal program at the local level.

Hypothesis 5: The effective use of staff development teleconferences requires a significant commitment of human resources for their promotion, planning, and coordination at the local level.

Hypothesis 6: An institution which routinely designs and delivers instruction to adults will be more likely to utilize a staff development teleconference effectively than will an institution, such as a school district, which typically does not have staff trained in or with experience in adult learning and programming.

Hypothesis 7: The most effective intermediaries in the delivery of staff development teleconferences to teachers are school-based specialists in inservice training/staff development.

Recommendations for the Practitioner

The following recommendations are not a comprehensive listing of all of the considerations which originating institutions and receiving institutions should take into account when planning and utilizing staff development teleconferences. However, they do represent a first step in the development of a comprehensive approach to the design and utilization of teleconferences which are effective learning experiences for school teachers and administrators.

Originating Institutions

Do not announce the availability of your teleconference to potential receiving sites until you can adequately describe it to them.

When you do announce the teleconference, be sure to furnish potential sites with specific and detailed information on its content, format, approach (or point-of-view), on-camera presenters, unique features, extent and nature of hand-out materials, etc. Tell the potential audience what they should and should not expect to get out of the teleconference. Avoid having them feel later that they were misled or not sufficiently prepared for the content/format/approach/point-of-view of the teleconference.

Include in your advance literature information on the learning objectives and intended learner outcomes associated with the teleconference. Help the receiving sites accurately target the audience within their institutions (or those outside of it) who would benefit from the teleconference.

Even those staff development teleconferences intended for in-house use only should be announced at least six months in advance of the broadcast dates to allow sites adequate time to consider the opportunities, to make a decision whether to receive them, and then to promote and coordinate the teleconferences effectively at the local level. Teleconferences which are to be marketed by receiving institutions to audiences outside their own organizations should be announced even earlier than this.

As a first step in your design of the teleconference itself, attempt to describe the audience you are producing the program for. Consider, for example, (a) the level of awareness of the topic which they will bring with them to the teleconference (which will help you to know how elementary or sophisticated you should be in your treatment of the topic); (b) their characteristics (will they be exclusively school teachers and administrators or only primarily school teachers and administrators--and how do you target the content if, for example, they are a mixed audience of school teachers and college faculty?).

Define what your objectives are. What do you hope to give your audience? What do you intend for them to come away from the teleconference with? To what extent will you be giving information versus demonstrating versus advocating a position? Be sure to communicate these objectives to your potential audience.

As you design your teleconference, include in your deliberations representatives of the target audience for your program. For example, if you are designing a program for high school geometry teachers, involve a representative group of these teachers in your planning efforts so that you benefit from their counsel.

Do not execute your teleconference by committee. One or two persons should be assigned the responsibility for making and implementing the many decisions which will need to be made as you design, market, and deliver your teleconference. They should seek out the counsel of many, but they need the courage to personally assume the ultimate responsibility for envisioning what the teleconference will be and then making it happen.

Once you know what you want to communicate in the teleconference, consider your time constraints: how long will your teleconference be? Look at the whole of what you had hoped to cover, and narrow the content to a manageable amount.

If you are going to rely on one presenter to deliver the majority of the content of the teleconference (and especially if the presenter is from outside your own organization), then make sure that the person is a recognized authority in the field, is well-known to the potential audience you are trying to reach, and is a dynamic speaker on camera.

If you are going to have a featured presenter deliver more than 15 minutes of prepared remarks, consider re-fashioning that portion of the program into an interview format. The presenter can develop a series of questions based on the content s/he intended to deliver in prepared remarks, and a moderator can then interview the presenter to elicit this information in a more informal and personable style than is possible with the typical lecture format. The interview offers several advantages over the lecture: it relieves the pressure on the presenter to remember what might be 40-50 minutes of prepared remarks (or, if the presenter intended to remedy this problem by reading from a paper, it relieves the audience of the burden of having to listen to such a straight reading); it can quickly relax the presenter, since the pressure (and the camera) are off him or her during the time the moderator asks the next question; and it can increase the audio and visual stimulation to the audience (and therefore hold their attention better) since the action will switch periodically from presenter to moderator. A good example of such an interview format in action would be commercial television's Phil Donahue Show, in which Mr. Donahue, before turning to the audience for their questions for the featured guest, asks his own series of leading questions intended to elicit background information from the guest about the story, or point-of-view, or issue which has made him or her noteworthy. Many other such examples exist in both commercial and public broadcasting.

If at all possible, structure the teleconference as a workshop-- rather than as a traditional academic conference. A carefully crafted workshop will be more effective with most teachers than will a conference spotlighting a lecture by a featured presenter, even if the lecture is followed by questions-and-answers. (However, if you must have one featured presenter, note the suggestion above on how the lecture format can be replaced by a more effective interview format.)

Think of the teleconference as part of a more comprehensive "learning package" or "learning mix" which you will help sites to deliver to their local audiences. Included in the mix would be suggested pre-teleconference and post-teleconference activities to be organized at the local site, supplementary hand-out materials, etc.

Focus on practical applications rather than theory or philosophy.

Plan the teleconference in detail--each of its parts and aspects--so that each piece is moving you purposefully and single-mindedly towards the accomplishment of the objectives you have identified for the program. This is especially important with respect to "guests" (featured presenters--especially if they are from outside your organization) who are invited to appear on the broadcast. As you map out your program, you should know very clearly and definitely what "piece" of the content you will be relying on a "guest" to cover--and you need to be sure that you have briefed the "guest" sufficiently on this content and on the intended audience so that s/he delivers what you need.

Consider the medium--and try to utilize it for maximum impact. Consider pre-taping demonstrations and examples of what you will be talking about. Don't just tell the audience about something--try also to show them it in action.

Before deciding to pre-tape video at a remote location, first investigate to find out if there is any suitable existing videotape which will serve your purpose (e.g., a TV report on an innovative school cooperative that you wanted to feature--and that you might find out about through talking with an administrator of the cooperative). Start early on your efforts to obtain the tape so that there is ample time to preview it (to see what--if any of it --suits your purposes), to consider how you might want to edit it for your program, and to secure permission to use it on your teleconference.

If you are going to have to shoot your own tape, start planning in ample time. Remember that pre-taping requires more than additional dollars; it also requires additional human effort to coordinate and precisely plan what it is you hope to capture on tape. It takes a great deal of lead time to secure approval and cooperation from other agencies (e.g., school districts) and to professionally edit the tape which you shoot.

If your topic does not lend itself to taped demonstrations, consider a montage of short, taped interviews with people who have experienced or who have accomplished what you are talking about. Personal testimony can be very effective.

Vary the format of the program: taped demonstrations, mini-lectures, taped interviews, case studies, discussions at the local sites, panel comments, called-in questions, etc. Try to organize the program in segments of no more than 15-20 minutes (segmented by topic and/or by format) in order to maintain the audience's attention.

Whenever a person is scheduled to deliver prepared remarks on camera, punctuate the presentation and reinforce the learning by having major points, key concepts, definitions of terms, etc., appear at appropriate intervals as text on the screen. (Be sure to include these in participants' hand-out materials as well.)

Choose carefully those persons who will appear on camera, and then work with them so that they become as comfortable as possible with the medium.

Script out your teleconference in advance in sufficient detail so that your moderator can plan to help the viewer integrate the whole of what s/he is seeing. Through pointed introductions and transitions, the moderator needs continually to tell the audience where you are going and where you have been--to help the audience see the organization and logic and flow of what you are doing--as well as to understand its importance. Why are we looking at this? What kind of look are we going to take? Transitions can make the teleconference.

Plan for questions and comments from the receiving sites--and preferably plan it so that there is opportunity for interaction at several points during the teleconference. Don't just block off the last 20-25 minutes of the program for questions. Have experts at your facility screen the incoming calls to ensure that only good, relevant questions get on the air. Have a back-up plan if questions and comments from the receiving sites are not forthcoming.

Consider taking a break during the national broadcast to allow local sites time for discussion, and then resume the national broadcast to allow sites to call-in the questions and comments which were identified during the local discussions as most central or important to them.

Be creative in considering how you can help the audiences at the different sites feel involved in the program.

Once you begin to have sites subscribe to receive your teleconference, attempt to find out from those sites who your actual audience will be. Where possible, you might be able to modify and adapt your program to suit their needs (e.g., you could select examples appropriate to them to use as illustrations of the points which you are making during the program).

Consider furnishing sites with activities to be done immediately before the broadcast--e.g., a series of discussion questions, worksheets, questionnaires, or exercises to be completed to set the stage for what will be the focus of the national broadcast. If possible, coordinators could synthesize the main points of a discussion at each site and telephone in this information before the broadcast, so that it could be referenced on the air. This would be one way to promote a feeling of involvement of

the audience with the program.

Furnish coordinators with information on follow-up activities which could be organized at the local site--discussions, hands-on activities, complementary local programming featuring local experts. Help make it easy for the coordinators at the sites to do their job. Help the coordinators to see how they can adapt or re-fashion the teleconference to suit the needs of their audiences, and, in the process, make the teleconference a more meaningful learning experience for their participants. Emphasize the importance of the local component in ensuring participant satisfaction.

Keep in close contact with the coordinators at each site. Learn who they are and what their assigned responsibilities are in relation to the teleconference. Offer to help them with their job and suggest ways in which they might stretch beyond what is being required of them to take an active role in designing a meaningful learning experience for the participants at their sites--an experience featuring the teleconference as one piece--although a very central piece--of a more comprehensive learning package.

Let the site coordinators know that you appreciate their position. Many times they will have had responsibility for the teleconference thrust upon them, on top of everything else that they do--without release time to give it proper attention and without any special training in how to perform well in the position. Many times they will be ill-informed of the intent and the wishes of those within their institution who made the decision to subscribe to the teleconference. It may not be clear that they have the authority--let alone the financial resources--to plan activities or enhancements to complement the teleconference. Let them know that you understand the limitations under which they may labor.

Suggest to the site coordinators some ways in which they might promote attendance at their sites--even if the teleconference is only an optional staff development opportunity for their own members. Focus on internal promotion as a form of marketing.

If many of the receiving sites are located within relative geographic proximity to you, consider inviting the site coordinators to come to your facility for a half-day of orientation and training.

Develop and distribute to all site coordinators a short manual related to the effective local use of staff development teleconferences. Include practical tips to increase attendance and participant satisfaction at the local level.

As your plans for the teleconference develop, keep the site coordinators informed of the way the program is shaping up.

Don't rely exclusively on the mails for your communication with the site coordinators. When you can, keep in touch more personally by phone.

Develop relevant, high-quality materials to accompany the teleconference. Reference the materials on the air to promote a feeling of involvement

of the audience with the program. Whenever possible, include a copy of what you are referencing on the screen so that those who may not have the materials can follow what is happening. The materials should include an agenda, background information on the featured presenters, full references to the source of any videotape shown on the broadcast, the learning objectives/expected learner outcomes for the teleconference, a broad topical outline of the content with space for participants to take notes, a bibliography of relevant materials and, when appropriate, reprints of selected relevant articles.

Do not substitute the mere duplication of relevant, existing articles--no matter how good they are--for the creation of hand-out materials pertinent and specific to the teleconference. Well-designed materials created especially for the teleconference will enhance the learning experience and will increase participant satisfaction with the teleconference.

Mail hand-out materials to the sites in ample time for them to be duplicated for participants. Mailing more than one month in advance will also allow the site coordinators to benefit from the materials. As they work to plan local programs geared to the content of the national broadcast, they can use the hand-out materials to be sure they are targeting their efforts appropriately.

Evaluate the teleconference. Obtain evaluations not only from the site coordinators (possibly by telephone interviews to make it easy for them to respond) but also from individual participants. Work with the site coordinators in advance to get their commitment to this process. Be willing to expand or modify your participant evaluation form to suit the needs of the local sites.

Consider as part of your evaluation the collection of information from each site coordinator regarding the use that was made of the teleconference at the site, the extent and kind of coordination and promotion provided, any other activities planned in conjunction with the broadcast, the kinds and numbers of people who attended, a description of the room and of the equipment used for viewing the teleconference, an assessment of the quality of the video and audio signals received during the broadcast, and descriptions of any other factors present at the local site which might have influenced participants' satisfaction with the experience.

Receiving Institutions

Appoint someone at your site to serve as local coordinator. Define the responsibilities of the person to include some attention to local promotion of the event and some attention to designing an effective conference for the participants at your site.

Have your site coordinator establish personal contact with the person listed as the coordinator for the originating institution. Do not be afraid to pick up the telephone throughout your planning to ask ques-

tions and request more information.

If the description of the teleconference which you have been furnished by the originating institution does not make clear who would benefit from the teleconference, what the objectives of the teleconference are, what the content and format of the program will be, then ask for this information from the originator.

Ask the coordinator at the originating institution if you--or a content expert from your institution--can talk directly with the teleconference presenters to get a better feeling for the content and approach of the teleconference, to ask questions, etc.

Continue to stay in touch with the originating institution to make sure that you are updated on the teleconference as plans for it develop.

Even though attendance at the teleconference may be optional, consider ways in which you could actively promote participation at your site. Everyone feels better when they are part of a program that is well attended. Involve key persons at your institution--administrators, influential teachers--in helping you plan the event, and ask the originating institution for more ideas on how you can promote attendance.

Consider having a discussion or short local presentation before the teleconference begins to set it in context for your audience. Ask the originating institution for suggestions on this if they have not supplied any as part of the teleconference "learning package."

Organize at least a facilitated discussion at your site following the teleconference. If possible, include as panelists one or more persons from your institution--or from other appropriate agencies or organizations within your locale--with expertise in the subject area, who can react to the national content before you begin your local discussion. The local component is the opportunity for you to make meaningful to your local audience the content of the national broadcast, to relate the content to what is happening within your schools, your geographic area, etc.

If the topic lends itself to it, be creative in developing different kinds of local programming to follow the teleconference--e.g., a teleconference on educational software might be complemented at your site by a hands-on demonstration of microcomputer software packages which your institution owns and which are related to the topic. Try to supply in your local component an experience different from the experience provided in the national teleconference.

In announcing the teleconference to your potential audience, also announce any other activities which you have planned in connection with the broadcast.

Serve some kind of refreshments at the teleconference--and advertise that you are going to do this.

Have someone assigned to formally welcome your audience once they are

assembled and to introduce the teleconference and any other activities which you have planned. A teleconference--like a conference--should have a formal opening and a formal closing at each local site.

Consider having an orientation to teleconferencing for your potential users--either immediately before a particular teleconference or at some other time. Let your potential users know what teleconferencing can offer them and what it can not.

Consider compiling and distributing to participants a bibliography of materials--both print and nonprint--which are available within your institution and which relate to the topic at hand. Supply the call-numbers for your local library/media center collections. If the originating institution has furnished a bibliography, check the items on it against your collection and insert the appropriate call-numbers for the materials which are available in your locale. If possible, have as many of the items as you can available at the teleconference site for immediate check-out by interested participants.

Encourage your participants to call-in questions to the national broadcast. Offer to place the calls and read the questions for them.

Work with the originating institution to design an evaluation of the teleconference which will serve your needs as well as those of the originator. Expand or modify as necessary the participant evaluation form supplied by the originating institution, and encourage participants at your site to complete the forms. Respond frankly to any questions which you are asked to answer by the originating institution.

Having invested a great deal of time and effort in planning an effective learning experience for your own staff members, approach an administrator at your institution and suggest that other schools or institutions in the area be invited to attend--either free-of-charge or for a fee. Take the opportunity to show off how well your institution uses teleconferencing for staff development. In the process you will obtain local recognition for any of your own staff who are serving as panelists or discussion leaders during your follow-up local programming, and you can begin to build bridges and associations across districts (or institutions) among educators with common interests. Where appropriate, consider inviting parents (or other members of the public whom you serve), regional education service center staff, professional association representatives, state department of education personnel, etc., to your facility to view your success in action.

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